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ABSTRACT

During the colonial period, the ideology of work--the American work ethic--took root. Americans valued work and considered it an obligation to society, to oneself, and to one's family. The key to the agrarian culture was an ethic that recognized the importance of hard, physical labor within a framework of yearly cycles of tasks. The world of the colonial artisan was a landmark of a work ethic that wedded morality to manual labor and individual industry to community service. Colonial women's work ethic was part of the feminine ethic that stressed mothering, nurturing, and dedication to the needs of their families. The American Revolution brought a revolution of ideas and the promise of creating a genuinely democratic society. In the nineteenth century, there was a mixture of work ethics, including wage workers, craftsmen, slaves, the unskilled, immigrants, farmers, and women. No one work ethic fit all of these groups. It was the industrialized society that reduced most workers to wage workers and that eventually imposed a time-centered discipline in the workplace. This homogenized the mixture of work ethics of the nineteenth century into the profit-oriented, marketplace, consuming, and producing work ethic of the twentieth century. In twentieth century America, along with the work ethic began to grow a leisure ethic, a life ethic, an education ethic, and a caring ethic, all of which can combine to make life richer and more fulfilling. (A bibliographic essay concludes each chapter. An index is appended.) (YLB)

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